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Synthesizing and Focusing the Debate

Tera R. Hurt

Iowa State University, trh@iastate.edu

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Synthesizing and Focusing the Debate

Abstract

Ralph Richard Banks makes a substantial contribution to the field of Black relationships, and marriage in general, with the book *Is Marriage for White People? How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*. Banks synthesizes research from law, sociology, and public health (to name a few) in his presentation of issues salient to the changing landscape of relationship formation and maintenance. To offer concrete examples of relationship issues and to provide evidence to support his claims, Banks revisits well-known passages from popular movies and fictional literature and integrates examples from qualitative interviews he conducted with single Black women in their 30s and 40s. In this review, I describe four central issues that Banks addresses—similarities in marriage trends across groups, the pattern of marrying down but not out, challenges linked to gender relations, and relationship transiency—and discuss what I view as three limitations of the book.

Disciplines

African American Studies | Family Law | Family, Life Course, and Society | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology of Culture

Comments

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Book Review: *Is Marriage for White People?: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*

Ralph Richard Banks makes a substantial contribution to the field of Black relationships, and marriage in general, with the book, *Is Marriage for White People?: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*. Banks synthesizes research from law, sociology, and public health (to name a few) in his presentation of issues salient to the changing landscape of relationship formation and maintenance. To offer concrete examples of relationship issues and provide evidence to support his claims, Banks revisits well-known passages from popular movies and fictional literature and integrates examples from qualitative interviews he conducted with single Black women in their 30s and 40s. In this review, I will describe four central issues that Banks addresses--similarities in marriage trends across groups, the pattern of marrying “down” but not “out,” challenges linked to gender relations, and relationship transiency—and discuss what I view as three limitations of the book.

First, related to marriage trends, Banks notes that Black marriage formation reflects similar patterns in other racial groups. A decline in marriage rates has been observed on a societal level, not in just the Black community. Though individuals have not retreated from relationships, more Americans are either single or choosing to cohabit in long-term, committed relationships where they can benefit from mutual happiness and fulfillment without marrying. Banks acknowledges that some Black adults are not married by choice, while others come to accept their “unfulfilled hopes of marriage” and lead fulfilled lives as single persons (p. 14). Drawing on the work of legal scholars, Banks notes how changes in family law in American society have loosened the ties that used to be more binding relative to marriage and divorce. In light of these changes, he asserts that there are fewer legal rights with marriage, and hence, less

incentives to marry and more ease to exit marriage. Banks notes that such trends have been regarded as troubling by some American scholars and policymakers, whereas in Europe, the decline in marriage, coupled with a rise in non-marital relationships and births, have not been framed as a crisis.

Banks also convincingly notes that, despite the fact that the marriage decline is especially pronounced among economically disadvantaged adults, solely increasing economic stability among Blacks will not necessarily increase their marriage rates. Here, Banks offers evidence of a race and class paradox in marriage. For White men, as their incomes increase, so does the chance of marriage. Yet, for Black men, the likelihood of marriage plateaus at an annual income of \$75,000. Black men who earn at least \$100,000 per year are less apt to marry than their peers who earn \$75,000 or less.

Second, Banks highlights the pattern of “marry[ing] down not out” among Black women (p. 3). He pays considerable attention to the advancement of Black women in education, employment, and income, and how such gains have outpaced Black men’s progress in these areas. He elegantly details how inequities in spouses’ human capital can affect marital quality and longevity, as well as how such an imbalance in resources among Blacks reduces the prospects of women marrying and staying married. But, Black women remain committed to marrying Black men because of their allegiance to cultural scripts (e.g., anxieties about dishonoring their Black heritage and betraying Black men), concerns about partnering interracially (e.g., concerns about non-Black men’s abilities to relate to Black women’s experiences, fears of not being accepted by non-Black families, apprehension about raising children with someone from another culture), and personal preferences to partner with Black men.

As a result, Black women frequently “marry down, not out” as Banks phrases it. That is, Black women prefer to marry Black men even though the men may have less educational achievement, occupational security, and financial resources, rather than marry men of another race with more human capital. Not surprisingly, Black couples are at an increased risk of separating and divorcing under these circumstances. At the end of the book, Banks strongly advocates for Black women to overcome reservations about interracial partnerships and explore opportunities to form marriages with non-Black men. Such men may offer the kind of human capital that Black women desire in a marriage partner; such resources could serve as stabilizing agents for their marital unions.

Third, Banks also outlines how conflict in gender relations among Black men and women challenges relationship formation and maintenance. Historical experiences like slavery and more contemporary experiences with discrimination and racism contribute to differences in marital formation and maintenance among Blacks compared to couples from other racial backgrounds. Contemporary structural inequalities may have continued to challenge Black men’s ability to be stable providers (e.g., high rates of unemployment, underemployment, and incarceration) and undermined family formation based on male breadwinning. In the face of such hardships, individuals have drawn on the strength of extended family networks in order to survive and prosper. Banks surmises that relying on extended families in this way may have undermined the likelihood of getting married and staying married for Blacks; that is, individuals may have relied more on family members than spouses for support in times of need.

Fourth, Banks points out how Black relationships are more transient when compared to relationships in other racial groups. Such fluidity in relationships is consequential for the stability of marital unions, in particular. Blacks are less likely to marry and report being less satisfied in

their marriages when they do marry. Black marriages are commonly egalitarian, and as such, perhaps more than their married peers from other racial groups, Black couples must negotiate roles and expectations more explicitly. This may be especially true when relationship conditions deviate from cultural scripts (e.g., wife's breadwinning, parental arrangements with noncustodial children, husband's economic instability).

One contributing factor to the relationship transiency observed in the Black community concerns "man-sharing" and extramarital affairs. Banks maintains that Black men do not settle for monogamous relationships because there are too many women available to them. Banks describes how non-exclusive relationships flourish under these circumstances. Such non-exclusivity also creates serious challenges for the sexual health of men and women from a public health perspective, and serves to erode interpersonal trust between Black men and women. Banks concludes that men will only be more likely to opt for monogamous relationships when the pool of available Black women is reduced (e.g., more Black women partnering with non-Black men).

Despite the many strengths of this book, I found that the book was limited in a few respects. First, Banks does not reference any theories or conceptual perspectives in his discussion of the issues. Utilization of such frameworks would help to appropriately provide context and structure to many of the issues being explored and ensure that his discussion was ecologically valid. For example, the mundane environmental stress model could have been employed as a conceptual framework for delineating how inequalities linked to employment, education, and incarceration give rise to patterns of distress and conflict in Black relationships (Carroll, 1998; Murry et al., 2001; Peters & Massey, 1983). In addition, ecological theory would have been a useful guide to describe how various contexts marked by structural inequalities potentially impact Black relationship formation and stability (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). With the use of such

theoretical frames, Banks could have provided more insight into the specific barriers and motivating factors at the micro-level and macro-level that shape Black women's and men's decisions and attitudes regarding intimate ties.

A second limitation concerns Banks' matter-of-fact presentation, and perhaps misrepresentation, of basic "facts." For example, Banks asserts that Black women do not marry men from other races – in fact, this is a fundamental premise of his book. Recent Census data, however, reveals that the percent of Black women who marry men of other races is increasing (3.6% in 2005 to 4.6% in 2010, especially among those who reside in urban areas (Black Demographics, n.d.). Of course, 4.6% is a small portion of Black women. But, a more precise presentation of the facts would have led Banks to consider this growing trend in interracial partnering and marriage among Black women, and utilize this critical point to provide support for his endorsement for Black women to marry out, not down.

A third limitation relates to the need to better understand Black men's experiences, including their struggles to navigate structural barriers and persistent inequities in education, the workforce, and the criminal justice system (to name a few). Banks could have made a greater contribution to the field by interviewing Black men in order to document their perspectives or researching empirical work that sampled Black men specifically (e.g., Chaney, 2009). Information gleaned from interviews or previous studies could have illuminated successes and challenges among Black men and uncovered how these experiences relate to their relationship choices. Scholars have simply ignored the significance of engaging Black men in research studies; to be sure, it is critical to learn more about their experiences as part of understanding the larger relationship context. To do so, it is important to consider more than only women's perspectives (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007; Marks, Hopkins, Chaney, Monroe, Nesteruk, &

Sasser, 2008; Michael & Tuma, 2005). Collecting information about Black men's life choices and relationship experiences could help develop better approaches to encouraging relationship formation and maintenance and foster an important and positive change in the Black community (Koball, 1998; Lichter, McLaughlin, Kephart, & Landry, 1992; Marks, Hopkins-Williams, Chaney, Nesteruk, & Sasser, 2010).

Overall, Banks' analysis of the issues is well-grounded in existing empirical work, if not theory. He does a fine job of reviewing existing work on the issues while offering new insights about relationship phenomena in the Black community. The trends in Black relationship formation are significant to focus on because such changes in family formation have critical consequences for individual well-being, children's life chances, father involvement, and family stability. As Banks asserts, marriage is still very desirable among most adults; in American culture, marriage still holds symbolic significance yet is a step that individuals take *after* important milestones in life have been achieved. I underscore Banks' perspective that one way to encourage marriage, for all populations, is to continue to work to address structural inequalities in American society. Individuals are most likely to marry when conditions are most favorable for tying the knot, including plentiful well-paying jobs for men and women, equal opportunity to pursue higher education, and reduced likelihood of being ensnared in the criminal justice system. Moreover, Banks' recommendation that Black women "marry out not down" and consider partnering with non-Black men in order to fulfill their hopes of marriage, motherhood, and family is worthy of serious consideration.

Tera R. Hurt, Ph.D.

Iowa State University of Science and Technology

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